



The Theory of Knowledge of Saint Isaac the Syrian¹

Introduction

In European philosophy man always appears, to a greater or lesser extent, as a fragmented being. Nowhere is he seen as whole, nowhere is he seen as complete and integrated, but always as broken and fragmented. There is no philosophical system in which man is not broken up into parts that would defeat the attempt of any thinker to put them together into a single whole. On one hand, realism brings man down to the level of the senses, and then through the senses to things, to matter, so that a man is no longer his own master but scattered among things. On the other hand, rationalism separates man and his understanding, seeing the latter as the chief fount of truth and the highest measure of all that is, attributing all worth to it, making it an absolute and idolizing it, while at the same time belittling the other psychic and physical powers of man. Critical thought, for its part, is little more than an apologia for a rationalism and sensualism that drags the understanding, and man with it, down to the level of the senses. As for pantheism and all such monistic systems, they regard the world and man as a mass of contradictory opposites which can never be brought to a single, logical unity. All of these philosophical systems have the same result: a superficial, phenomenalist understanding both of man and of the world.

The man of phenomenalist philosophy—a philosophy that is always relativist as well—is man without a central focal point. Where does the

¹ All the references in the text are from *The Ascetic Writings of our Holy Father Isaac the Syrian*, ed. Nicephorus Theotokis (Leipzig 1770), re-edited by Joachim Spetsieris (Athens 1895).

world stand? And where does man? What is the foundation of the intellect and of knowledge? Man tries to explain himself in terms of things, but with a total lack of success, for by explaining himself in terms of things, man in the end is reduced to a thing himself, to matter. However much he may struggle to do so, the man of phenomenalist philosophy is in no position to testify to the objective reality of things. Still less is he able to show that things possess truth. By attempting to explain man by man, philosophy achieves a bizarre result: it presents a mirror image of a mirror image. In the last analysis, such philosophy, whatever its path, is centered on matter and on man. And one thing follows from all this: the impossibility of any true knowledge of man or of the world.

This result compels the philosophical spirit of man to make conjectures that transcend both man and matter. Through idealism he takes a leap into the supernatural. But this leap in turn leads to scepticism, for philosophical idealism regards man as a meta-empirical reality that can neither be described nor proven.

Man, as understood in relativist philosophy, is subject to a tragic destiny, for he has demonstrated that truth transcends both man and matter. There is an unbridgeable gulf between man and truth. Man is on one side of this gulf and can find no way of getting to the other, where transcendent Truth is to be found. But the power of Truth, from the other side, responds to the powerlessness of man on this side. Transcendent Truth crosses the gulf, arrives on our side of it and reveals Itself—Himself—in the person of Christ, the God-man. In Him transcendent Truth becomes immanent in man. The God-man reveals the truth in and through Himself. He reveals it, not through thought or reason, but by the life that is His. He not only has the truth, He is Himself the Truth. In Him, Being and Truth are one. Therefore He, in His person, not only defines Truth but shows the way to it: he who abides in Him will know the Truth, and the Truth will make him free (cf. John 8:32) from sin, falsehood, and death.

In the person of the God-man, God and man are indissolubly united. Man's understanding is not overthrown, but is renewed, purified and sanctified. It is deepened and divinized and made capable of grasping the truths of life in the light of God-made-man. In the God-man, absolute Truth has in its entirety been given in a real and personal way. This

is why He alone, among those born on earth, both has integral knowledge of the truth and can hand it on. The man who desires to know the truth has only to be made one with the God-man, to become one flesh with Him, to become a member of His divine and human Body, the Church (cf. Eph. 5:30, 3:6). Becoming such, a man acquires “the mind of Christ” (I Cor. 2:16), thinking, living, feeling in Christ, and thus coming to an integral knowledge of the Truth.

For the man in Christ, the antinomies of the mind are not irreconcilable opposites; they are simply ruptures caused by the upheaval of original sin in man. Uniting himself to Christ, man feels in himself a coming-together of fragmented parts, a healing of the intellect, a wholeness and integration that make him capable of integrated understanding.

Truth is objectively given in the person of Christ, the God-man. But the way in which this becomes subjective—that is, the practical side of the Christian theory of knowledge—was fully developed by the Fathers, those experienced, holy, and evangelical philosophers. Among the most outstanding of these holy philosophers was the great ascetic, St. Isaac the Syrian. In his writings, with a rare understanding based on experience, he traces the process of the healing and purification of man’s organs of knowledge, his growth in understanding and his progressive path through experience to the apprehension of eternal Truth. In the philosophy of St. Isaac the Syrian, based on the experience of grace, the principles and methodology of the Orthodox theory of knowledge have found one of their most perfect expressions. I shall now try to sketch out this theory of knowledge, or *gnoseology*.

The Sickness of the Organs of Understanding

The character of a man’s knowledge depends on the disposition, nature and condition of his organs of understanding. At all levels knowledge depends intrinsically on the means of understanding. Man does not make truth; the act of understanding is an act of making one’s own a truth which is already objectively given. This integration has an organic character, not unlike that of the grafting of a slip onto a vine, or its life in and from the vine (cf. John 15:1–6). Understanding is, then, a fruit on the tree of the human person. As is the tree, so are its fruits; as are the organs of understanding, so is the knowledge they engender.

Analyzing man by his empirical gifts, St. Isaac the Syrian finds that his organs of understanding are sick. “Evil is a sickness of soul”, whence all the organs of understanding are made sick.² Evil has its perceptions, the passions, and “the passions are illnesses of the soul”.³ Evil and the passions are not natural to the soul; they are accidents, adventitious and intrusive,⁴ an unnatural addition to the soul.⁵

What are the passions in themselves? They are “a certain hardness or insensitivity of being”.⁶ Their causes are to be found in the things of life themselves.⁷ The passions are the desire for wealth and amassing of goods, for ease and bodily comfort; they are thirst for honor and the exercise of power; they are luxury and frivolity; they are the desire for glory from men and fear for one’s own body.⁸ All these passions have one common name—“the world”.⁹ “The world means carnal conduct and a carnal mind”.¹⁰ The passions are the attacks of the world on man by means of the things of the world. Divine grace is the only power capable of repulsing them.¹¹ When the passions make their home in man, they uproot his soul.¹² They confuse the mind, filling it with fantastic forms, images, and desires,¹³ so that his thoughts are disturbed and filled with fantasy. “The world is a prostitute”,¹⁴ which, by means of its soul-destroying desires, beguiles the soul, undermines its virtues and destroys its God-given purity. Then, the soul, having itself become impure and a prostitute, gives birth to impure knowledge.

A feeble soul, a diseased intellect, a weakened heart and will—in brief, sick organs of understanding—can only engender, fashion and produce sick thoughts, sick feelings, sick desires, and sick knowledge.

² *Letter 4*, p. 380.

³ *Homily 83*, p. 317.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Homily 82*, p. 314.

⁶ *Homily 69*, p. 271.

⁷ *Homily 6*, p. 32.

⁸ *Homily 30*, p. 132.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹¹ *Homily 38*, p. 164.

¹² *Homily 26*, p. 112.

¹³ *Homily 56*, p. 227.

¹⁴ *Homily 85*, p. 329.

The Healing of the Organs of Understanding

St. Isaac gives a precise diagnosis of the sickness of the soul and of its organs of understanding, and just as clearly he gives the remedy, offering it categorically and with conviction. Since the passions are a sickness of the soul, the soul can only be healed by purification from the passions and from evil.¹⁵ The virtues are the health of the soul, as the passions are its sickness.¹⁶ The virtues are the remedies that progressively eliminate sickness from the soul and from the organs of understanding. This is a slow process, demanding much effort and great patience.¹⁷

The soul is made drunk by the passions but can recover its health if it will use the virtues as the path to sobriety.¹⁸ The virtues, however, are woven through with sorrow and afflictions.¹⁹ St. Isaac says that every virtue is a cross,²⁰ and even that sorrows and afflictions are the source of the virtues.²¹ He therefore expressly advocates a love of oppression and sorrow, so that by them a man may be freed from the things of this world and have a mind that is detached from the world's confusion.²² For man must first free himself from the material world in order to be born of God. Such is the economy of grace; such, too, is the economy of knowledge.

If a man resolves to treat and heal his soul, he must first apply himself to a careful examination of his whole being. He must learn to distinguish good from evil, the things of God from those of the devil, for "discernment is the greatest of the virtues".²³ The acquisition of the virtues is a progressive and organic process: one virtue follows another.²⁴ One depends on the other; one is born of the other: "Every virtue is the mother of the next".²⁵ Among the virtues there is not only an ontological order, but also a chronological one. The first among them is faith.

¹⁵ *Homily* 86, p. 354.

¹⁶ *Homily* 83, p. 317.

¹⁷ Cf. *Homily* 38, p. 164.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁹ *Homily* 37, p. 161.

²⁰ *Homily* 19, p. 73.

²¹ *Homily* 27, p. 119.

²² *Homily* 1, pp. 5 and 2.

²³ *Homily* 7, p. 33; cf. *Homily* 26, p. 109; *Homily* 18, p. 64.

²⁴ *Homily* 46, p. 190.

²⁵ *Homily* 68, p. 270.

Faith

It is by the ascesis of faith that the treatment and cure of a soul which is sick with the passions is begun. Once faith begins to live in a man, the passions begin to be uprooted from his soul. But “until the soul becomes intoxicated with faith in God, until it comes to feel faith’s power”, it can neither be healed of the passions nor overcome the material world.²⁶ There is both a negative side to the ascesis of faith, freedom from sinful matter, and a positive side, oneness with God.²⁷

The soul, which was dispersed by the senses among the things of this world, is brought back to itself by the ascesis of faith, by fasting from material things and by devoting itself to a constant remembrance of God. This is the foundation of all good things.²⁸ Freedom from enslavement to sinful matter is essential for advancement in the spiritual life.²⁹ The beginning of this new way of life is found in the concentration of one’s thoughts on God, in incessant pondering on the words of God, and in a life of poverty.³⁰

Through faith the mind, which was previously dispersed among the passions, is concentrated, freed from sensuality, and endowed with peace and humility of thought.³¹ When it lives by the senses in a sensual world, the mind is sick.³² With the help of faith, however, the mind is delivered from the prison of this world, where it has been stifled by sin, and enters into the new age, where it breathes in a wondrous new air.³³ “The sleep of the mind” is as dangerous as death, and it is therefore essential to rouse the mind by faith to the performance of spiritual works,³⁴ by which man will overcome himself and drive out the passions.³⁵ “Drive out self, and the enemy will be driven from your side”³⁶

²⁶ *Homily* 1, p. 2.

²⁷ Cf. *Homily* 23, p. 90.

²⁸ Cf. *Homily* 26, p. 109.

²⁹ *Homily* 34, p. 150.

³⁰ *Homily* 1, p. 2.

³¹ *Homily* 5, p. 23; cf. *Homily* 1, p. 3.

³² *Homily* 25, p. 106.

³³ *Homily* 15, p. 54.

³⁴ Cf. *Homily* 26, p. 115t.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 111.

³⁶ *Homily* 30, p. 127.

In the ascesis of faith, man is asked to act according to a paradox that passes understanding: “Be dead in your life, and you will live after death”.³⁷ By faith the mind is healed and acquires wisdom. The soul becomes wise when it stops “consorting shamelessly with promiscuous thoughts”.³⁸ “Love of the body is a sign of unbelief”.³⁹ Faith frees the intellect from the categories of the senses and sobers it by means of fasting, by pondering on God⁴⁰ and by vigils.⁴¹

Intemperance and a full stomach cloud the mind,⁴² distract it and disperse it among fantasies and passions. The knowledge of God cannot be found in a body that loves pleasure.⁴³ It is from the seed of fasting that the blade of a healthy understanding grows—and it is from satiety that debauchery comes, and impurity from excess.⁴⁴

The thoughts and desires of the flesh are like a restless flame in a man, and the way to healing is to plunge the intellect into the ocean of the mysteries of Holy Scripture.⁴⁵ Unless it is freed from earthly possessions, the soul cannot be freed from disturbing thoughts, nor feel peace of mind without dying to the senses.⁴⁶ The passions darken the thoughts and blind the mind.⁴⁷ Troubled, chaotic thoughts arise from an abuse of the stomach.⁴⁸

Shame and the fear of God steady the tumult of the mind; the lack of this shame and this fear disturb the balance of the understanding, making it fickle and unstable.⁴⁹ The mind is only on a firm foundation if it keeps the Lord’s commandments⁵⁰ and is ready to endure suffering

³⁷ *Homily* 44, p. 184.

³⁸ *Homily* 1, pp. 3 and 4.

³⁹ *Homily* 26, p. 116.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 109; cf. *Homily* 38, p. 165.

⁴¹ *Homily* 29, p. 125.

⁴² *Homily* 34, p. 147.

⁴³ *Homily* 56, p. 223.

⁴⁴ *Homily* 69, p. 272.

⁴⁵ *Homily* 1, p. 4.

⁴⁶ *Homily* 5, p. 23.

⁴⁷ *Homily* 26, p. 111.

⁴⁸ *Homily* 56, p. 221.

⁴⁹ *Homily* 1, p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Homily* 36, p. 160.

and affliction.⁵¹ If it is enslaved by the things of life, it is darkened.⁵² Collecting himself through faith, a man awakens his intellect towards God,⁵³ and by prayerful silence cleanses his mind⁵⁴ and overcomes the passions.⁵⁵ The soul is restored to health by silence. It is therefore necessary to train oneself to silence—and this is a labor that brings sweetness to the heart.⁵⁶ It is through silence that a man reaches peace from unwanted thoughts.⁵⁷

Faith brings peace to the intellect and, in bringing it, uproots rebellious thoughts. Sin is the source of restlessness and strife in the thoughts, and is also the source of man's struggle against heaven and with other men. "Be at peace with yourself, and you will bring peace to heaven and to earth".⁵⁸ Until faith appears, the intellect is dispersed among the things of this world; it is by faith that this fragmentation of the intellect is overcome.⁵⁹ The wandering of the thoughts is provoked by the demon of harlotry,⁶⁰ as is the wandering of the eyes by the spirit of uncleanness.⁶¹

By faith the intellect is confirmed in pondering on God. The way of salvation is that of the constant remembrance of God.⁶² The intellect separated from remembrance of God is like a fish out of water.⁶³ The freedom of a true man consists in his freedom from the passions, in his resurrection with Christ, and in a joyous soul.⁶⁴

The passions can only be overcome by the practice of the virtues,⁶⁵ and every passion must be fought to the death.⁶⁶ Faith is the first and

⁵¹ *Homily* 30, p. 129.

⁵² *Homily* 2, p. 10.

⁵³ *Homily* 3, p. 14.

⁵⁴ *Homily* 23, p. 93.

⁵⁵ *Homily* 41, p. 172.

⁵⁶ *Homily* 34, p. 149.

⁵⁷ *Homily* 15, p. 55.

⁵⁸ *Homily* 30, p. 127.

⁵⁹ *Homily* 5, p. 21; cf. *Homily* 26, p. 110.

⁶⁰ *Homily* 2, p. 9; cf. *Homily* 43, p. 180.

⁶¹ *Homily* 26, p. 112.

⁶² *Homily* 5, p. 26.

⁶³ *Homily* 30, p. 127.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Homily* 68, p. 269; cf. *Homily* 81, p. 310.

⁶⁶ *Homily* 38, p. 166; cf. *Homily* 44, p. 184; *Homily* 56, p. 230.

chief weapon in the struggle with the passions, for faith is the light of the mind that drives away the darkness of the passions, and the strength of the intellect that banishes sickness from the soul.⁶⁷

Faith bears within itself not only its own principle and substance, but the principle and substance of all the other virtues—developing as they do one from the other and encircling one another like the annual rings of a tree. If faith can be said to have a language, that language is prayer.

Prayer

It is by the ascesis of faith that a man conquers egotism, steps beyond the bounds of self, and enters into a new, transcendent reality which also transcends subjectivity. In this new reality new laws obtain rule; what is old has passed away and all is made new. Plunged into the unknown depths of this new reality, the ascetic of faith is led and guided by prayer; he feels, thinks, and lives by prayer.

Tracing this path of faith in the intellect of man, St. Isaac notes that the intellect is guarded and guided by prayer, every good thought being transformed by prayer into a pondering on God.⁶⁸ But prayer is also a hard struggle, calling the whole person into action. Man crucifies himself in prayer,⁶⁹ crucifying the passions and sinful thoughts that cling to his soul. “Prayer is the slaying of the carnal thoughts of man’s fleshy life”⁷⁰

Patient perseverance in prayer is for man a very hard ascesis, that of the denial of self.⁷¹ This is fundamental to the work of salvation. Prayer is the fount of salvation, and it is by prayer that all the other virtues—and all good things—are acquired.⁷² This is why a man of prayer is assailed by monstrous temptations, from which he is protected and saved only by prayer.

⁶⁷ *Homily* 12, p. 49.

⁶⁸ *Homily* 35, p. 155.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁷⁰ *Homily* 69, p. 272.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Homily* 21, p. 83.

The surest guardian of the intellect is prayer.⁷³ It drives away the clouds of the passions and illuminates the intellect⁷⁴ bringing wisdom to the mind.⁷⁵ Unceasing abiding in prayer is a true sign of perfection.⁷⁶

Spiritual prayer turns into ecstasy, in which are revealed the mysteries of the Holy Trinity, and the intellect enters that sphere of holy unknowing that is greater than knowledge.⁷⁷

Begun thus by faith, the healing of the organs of understanding is continued by prayer. The bounds of human personality are pushed wider and wider, self-centeredness being progressively replaced by God-centeredness.

Love

“Love is born of prayer”,⁷⁸ just as prayer is born of faith. The virtues are of one substance, and are thus born of one another. Love for God is a sign that the new reality into which a man is led by faith and prayer is far greater than that which has gone before. Love for God and man is the work of prayer and faith; a true love for man is in fact impossible without faith and prayer.

By faith man changes worlds: he moves from the limited world to the limitless, where he lives no longer by the laws of the senses but by the laws of prayer and love,.St. Isaac lays great emphasis on the conviction he came to through his ascetic experience: that love for God comes through prayer: “Love is the fruit of prayer”.⁷⁹ One can receive love from God through prayer, and cannot in any way acquire it without the struggle of prayer. Since man comes to the knowledge of God through faith and prayer, it is strictly true that “love is born of knowledge”.⁸⁰

Through faith man renounces the law of egotism; he renounces his sinful soul. Though he loves his soul, he loathes the sin that is in it. By

⁷³ *Homily* 49, p. 205.

⁷⁴ *Homily* 14, p. 53.

⁷⁵ *Homily* 35, p. 155.

⁷⁶ *Homily* 85, p. 346.

⁷⁷ *Homily* 32, p. 140t.

⁷⁸ *Homily* 35, p. 156.

⁷⁹ *Homily* 69, p. 272.

⁸⁰ *Log.* 38, p. 164; cf. *Homily* 84, p. 326.

prayer, he strives to replace the law of egotism with the law of God, to replace passions with virtues, to replace human life with divine life, and thereby heal the soul of its sin. This is why St. Isaac teaches that “the love of God lies in self-denial of the soul”.⁸¹

Impurity and sickness of soul are unnatural accretions; they are no part of its created nature, for “purity and health are the kingdom of the soul”.⁸² A soul weakened by the passions is a ready ground for the cultivation of hatred, and “love is only acquired through healing of the soul”.⁸³

Love is of God, “for God is love” (I John 4:8). “He who acquires love puts on with it God Himself”.⁸⁴ God has no bounds, and love is therefore boundless and without limit,⁸⁵ so that “he who loves by and in God loves all things equally and without distinction”. St. Isaac says of such a man that he has achieved perfection.⁸⁶ As an example of perfect love, St. Isaac quotes the wish of the holy Abba Agathon “to find a leper and change bodies with him”.⁸⁷

In the kingdom of love the antinomies of the mind disappear. The man who strives in love enjoys a foretaste of the harmony of Paradise in himself and in God’s world around him, for he has been delivered from the hell of self-centeredness and has entered into the paradise of divine values and perfections. In St. Isaac’s words: “Paradise is the love of God, in which lies the sweetness of all blessings”.⁸⁸ Hell is the absence of the love of God, and “those tortured in hell are tortured by the whiplash of love”.⁸⁹ When a man acquires perfectly the love of God, he acquires perfection.⁹⁰ St. Isaac therefore recommends: “First acquire love, which is the original form of man’s contemplation of the Holy Trinity”.⁹¹

⁸¹ *Homily* 69, p. 272.

⁸² *Letter* 4, p. 378.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁸⁴ *Homily* 81, p. 308.

⁸⁵ *Homily* 58, p. 236.

⁸⁶ *Homily* 43, p. 180.

⁸⁷ *Homily* 81, p. 308; cf. *Letter* 4, p. 374.

⁸⁸ *Homily* 72, p. 282.

⁸⁹ *Homily* 84, p. 326.

⁹⁰ *Homily* 85, p. 348.

⁹¹ *Letter* 4, p. 387.

Freeing himself from the passions, man disengages himself step by step from that self-absorption that characterizes humanism. He leaves the sphere of death-dealing anthropocentrism and enters the sphere of the Holy Trinity. Here he receives into his soul the divine peace, wherein the oppositions and contradictions that arise from the categories of time and space lose their death-dealing power, and where he can clearly perceive his victory over sin and death.

Humility

Faith has its own thought-forms, having as it does its own way of life. A Christian not only lives by faith (cf. II Cor. 5:7) but also thinks by faith. Faith presents a new way of thinking, through which is effected all the work of knowing in the believing man. This new way of thinking is humility. Within the infinite reality of faith, the intellect abases itself before the ineffable mysteries of new life in the Holy Spirit. The pride of the intellect gives way to humility, and modesty replaces presumption. The ascetic of faith, protects all his thoughts through humility, and thereby also ensures for himself the knowledge of eternal truth.

Drawing its strength from prayer, humility goes on growing and growing without end. St. Isaac teaches that prayer and humility are always equally balanced, and that progress in prayer means progress also in humility, and vice versa.⁹² Humility is a power that collects the heart within itself⁹³ and prevents it from dissipating itself in proud thoughts and lustful desires. Humility is upheld and protected by the Holy Spirit, and not only draws man to God but also God to man.⁹⁴ Furthermore, humility was the cause of the Son of God's taking flesh, that closest union of God with man: "Humility made God a man on earth".⁹⁵ Humility is "the adornment of divinity, for the incarnate Word spoke with us through the human body with which he had clothed himself".⁹⁶

⁹² *Homily* 21, p. 83.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

⁹⁵ *Homily* 56, p. 229.

⁹⁶ *Homily* 20, p. 76.

Humility is a mysterious, divine power which is given only to the saints, to those who are perfected in the virtues, and it is given by grace. It “contains all things within itself”.⁹⁷ By the grace of the Holy Spirit “the mysteries are revealed to the humble”,⁹⁸ and it is these humble ones who are thereby perfect in wisdom.⁹⁹ “The humble man is the fount of the mysteries of the new age”.¹⁰⁰

Humility is temperance, and “the two of them prepare in the soul a pledge for the Holy Trinity”.¹⁰¹ Temperance derives from humility, and it is by humility that the intellect is healed and made whole. “From humility flow a meekness and recollection that is the temperance of the senses”.¹⁰² “Humility adorns the soul with temperance”.¹⁰³

When turned towards the world, a humble man reveals the whole of his personality through humility, imitating in this God incarnate. “Just as the soul is unknown and invisible to bodily sight, so a humble man is unknown among men”.¹⁰⁴ He not only seeks to be unnoticed by men but to be as utterly recollected within himself as is possible, becoming “as one who does not exist on earth, who has not yet come into being, and who is utterly unknown even to his own soul”.¹⁰⁵ A humble man belittles himself before all men,¹⁰⁶ but God therefore glorifies him, for “where humility blossoms, there God’s glory sprouts abundantly”,¹⁰⁷ and the plant of the soul produces an imperishable flower.

Grace and Freedom

The person of Christ the God-man presents in itself the ideal image of human personality and knowledge. The person of Christ of itself traces and defines the path of a Christian’s life in every way. In Him is

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 80; cf. *Homily* 23, p. 97; *Homily* 37, p. 160.

⁹⁹ *Homily* 20, p. 79.

¹⁰⁰ *Homily* 43, p. 176.

¹⁰¹ *Homily* 58, p. 236.

¹⁰² *Homily* 81, p. 312.

¹⁰³ *Homily* 23, p. 93.

¹⁰⁴ *Homily* 81, p. 311.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ *Homily* 5, p. 28.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

found the most perfect realization of the mystical union of God and man, while at the same time He reveals both God's work in man and man's in God.

God and man working together is the basic indication of Christian activity in the world. Man works with God and God with man (cf. I Cor. 3:9). Working within and around himself, the Christian gives himself entirely to ascesis, but he does this, and is able to do it, only through the ceaseless activity of the divine power that is grace. For the Christian no thought, no feeling, no action can come from the Gospel without the help of God's grace. Man, for his part, brings the desire, but God gives the grace, and it is from this mutual activity, or synergy, that Christian personality is born.

On every rung of the ladder of perfection, grace is essential to the Christian. A man can make no single evangelical virtue his own without the help and support of God's grace. Everything in Christianity is by grace and free will, for all is the common work of God and man. St. Isaac particularly stresses this common work of man's will and God's grace in the whole of a Christian's life. Grace opens a man's eyes to the discernment of good and evil. It strengthens the sense of God within him, opens the future to him and fills him with mystical light.¹⁰⁸

The more grace God gives to the man of faith, the more He reveals to him the abysses of evil in the world and in man. At the same time, He allows greater and greater temptations to assail him, that he may test the God-given power of grace and may feel and learn that it is only by the help of grace that he can overcome the ever more fearsome and scandalous temptations. For as soon as grace perceives that a man's soul is becoming self-sufficient, making him great in his own sight, it leaves him and lets temptations assail him until he becomes aware of his sickness and humbly takes refuge in God.¹⁰⁹

By the working together of God's grace and his own will, a man grows in faith to perfect stature.¹¹⁰ This happens by degrees, for grace enters into the soul "little by little",¹¹¹ being given before all else to the

¹⁰⁸ *Homily* 19, p. 72.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 73; cf. 46, pp. 192–93.

¹¹¹ *Homily* 57, p. 233.

humble. The greater the humility, the greater the grace, and wisdom is contained within grace. “The humble are endowed with wisdom by grace”.¹¹²

Grace-filled wisdom gradually reveals the mysteries to the humble, one after the other, culminating in the mystery of suffering. The humble know why man suffers, for grace reveals to them the meaning of suffering. The greater the grace that a man has, the greater his grasp of the meaning and purpose of suffering and temptation. If he drives grace from him by sloth and love of sin, a man drives from himself the only means he has of finding meaning and justification for his sufferings and temptations.

The Purification of the Intellect

By an unceasing renewal of self through a grace-filled asceticism, a man gradually drives sin and the passions from his whole being and from his organs of understanding, in this way healing them of these death-dealing illnesses. The healing of the organs of understanding from sin and the passions is at the same time their purification. Especial care must be taken with the chief organ of understanding, the intellect, for it has a particularly important role in the realm of human personality.

In nothing else is powerful vigilance as vital as in the work of purifying the intellect. For this task, the ascetic of faith must do battle with all his forces, so that with the help of the grace-filled evangelical virtues, he may renew and transform his intellect. St. Isaac offers us his rich experience in this.

According to him, impurity and heaviness of the intellect come from a satiated stomach.¹¹³ Fasting is therefore the chief means of purifying the intellect. The intellect is by nature fine and delicate,¹¹⁴ while heaviness is an unnatural addition introduced by sin. It is through prayer that the intellect is refined and rendered clear.¹¹⁵ Working on himself, a man tears the hard crust of sin from his intellect, refines it and makes it capable of discernment.¹¹⁶

¹¹² *Homily* 46, p. 193.

¹¹³ *Homily* 26, p. 111.

¹¹⁴ *Homily* 8, p. 36.

¹¹⁵ *Homily* 35, p. 154.

¹¹⁶ *Homily* 9, p. 41.

Transforming himself with the help of grace-filled ascetic effort, a man acquires purity of intellect, and with this purified intellect “comes to see the mysteries of God”.¹¹⁷ “The purification of the body produces a state that rejects the stain of the impurity of the flesh. The cleansing of the soul frees it from the secret passions that arise in the mind. The cleansing of the intellect takes place through the revelation of the mysteries”.¹¹⁸

Only the mind that has been cleansed by grace can offer pure, spiritual knowledge. “Until the mind is freed from its manifold thoughts and becomes completely pure, it cannot receive spiritual knowledge”.¹¹⁹ The men of this world “cannot cleanse their minds because of their great knowledge and acceptance of wickedness. Few there are who are able to return to man’s original purity of mind”.¹²⁰

Perseverance in prayer cleanses the intellect, illuminates it and fills it with the light of truth.¹²¹ The virtues, led by compassion, give the intellect peace and light.¹²² The cleansing of the intellect is not a dialectical, discursive and theoretical activity, but an act of grace through experience and is ethical in every respect. The intellect is purified by fasting, vigils, silence, prayer, and other ascetic practices.¹²³

“What is purity of intellect? Purity of intellect is the achievement, through striving in the virtues, of divine illumination”.¹²⁴ It is the fruit of ascetic effort in the virtues. The practice of the virtues increases grace in a man, and the bringing of grace to the intellect cleanses it from impure thoughts.¹²⁵ It is through asceticism that the intellect of a saint becomes pure, clear, and discerning.¹²⁶ “Purity of soul was an original charism of our nature. Until it has been purified from the passions, the soul has not been healed of the sickness of sin and cannot attain to the glory that it lost through transgression. If a man becomes worthy of

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ *Homily* 19, p. 63.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 70.

¹²⁰ *Homily* 44, p. 183.

¹²¹ *Homily* 23, pp. 97, 98.

¹²² *Homily* 23, p. 91.

¹²³ *Homily* 83, p. 320; cf. *Homily* 86, p. 353.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 319.

¹²⁵ *Homily* 11, p. 46.

¹²⁶ *Homily* 81, p. 310.

purification—or health of soul—his intellect then truly receives into itself joy through spiritual awareness, for he becomes a son of God and a brother of Christ".¹²⁷

If he overcomes the passions, a man achieves purity of soul.¹²⁸ The “darkening of the intellect” comes from lack of compassion and from laziness.¹²⁹ The virtues are “the wings of the intellect”, by the help of which it rises to heaven.¹³⁰ Christ sent down the Holy Spirit upon His apostles, and the Holy Spirit purified their intellects and made them perfect, slaying in them the old man of the passions and bringing the new, spiritual man to life".¹³¹

Fragmented by sinful and impure thoughts, the intellect recollects itself through prayer, silence, and the other ascetic practices.¹³² When the intellect frees itself by repentance from its close connection with the passions, at first it is like a bird that has had its wings clipped. It strives to rise above earthly things through prayer, but it cannot, being tied to the earth. The ability to fly comes only after long striving in the virtues, for it is then that it collects itself and learns to fly.¹³³

The love of God is a power that brings the intellect to itself.¹³⁴ The reading of hymns and psalms, pondering on death and the hope of future life are all “things that collect the intellect and protect it from fragmentation”.¹³⁵ The intellect is destined to reign over the passions,¹³⁶ to rule over the senses,¹³⁷ and to control them.¹³⁸

The purpose of all the laws and commandments of God is purity of heart.¹³⁹ God took flesh to cleanse our hearts and souls from evil and to

¹²⁷ *Homily* 86, p. 354.

¹²⁸ *Letter* 4, p. 377.

¹²⁹ *Homily* 30, p. 129.

¹³⁰ *Homily* 56, p. 228.

¹³¹ *Letter* 4, p. 390.

¹³² *Homily* 14, p. 53; cf. *Homily* 23, p. 99.

¹³³ *Homily* 56, p. 228.

¹³⁴ *Homily* 24, p. 104.

¹³⁵ *Homily* 68, p. 269.

¹³⁶ *Homily* 32, p. 137.

¹³⁷ *Homily* 8, p. 37.

¹³⁸ *Homily* 31, p. 134

¹³⁹ *Homily* 32, p. 134..

bring them back to their original state.¹⁴⁰ But there is a certain difference between purity of heart and purity of intellect. St. Isaac writes: “In what does purity of intellect differ from purity of heart? Purity of intellect is one thing, but purity of heart is another. For the intellect is one of the senses of the soul, but the heart contains the interior senses and governs them. It is their root. And if the root is holy, then the branches are also holy. If then, the heart is purified, clearly all the senses are purified”.¹⁴¹

The heart acquires purity by means of many trials, tribulations, and tears, and by the mortifying of all that is of the world.¹⁴² Tears cleanse the heart from impurity.¹⁴³ To the question: what is the sign by which one can know if a man has achieved purity of heart, St. Isaac replies: “When he sees all men as good, and no one appears to him to be unclean or profane”.¹⁴⁴

Purity of heart and intellect are acquired through asceticism. “Asceticism is the mother of holiness”.¹⁴⁵ The silent practice of bodily virtue cleanses the body of the matter that is in it.¹⁴⁶ However, “strenuous bodily effort without purity of intellect is like a barren womb and withered breasts. It cannot come near to the knowledge of God. It wearies the body but has no concern to uproot the passions from the intellect. Thus it profits nothing”¹⁴⁷

The sign of purity is: to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep; to be in pain with the sick and in anguish with the sinners; to rejoice with the repentant and to participate in the agony of those who suffer; to criticize no man and, in the purity of one’s own mind, to see all men as good and holy.¹⁴⁸

The intellect cannot be cleansed nor can it be glorified with Christ if the body does not suffer with and for Christ; the glory of the body is “temperate submission before God, and the glory of the intellect is the

¹⁴⁰ *Letter 4*, p. 367.

¹⁴¹ *Homily 83*, pp. 319–20.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 320.

¹⁴³ *Homily 85*, p. 342.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

¹⁴⁵ *Homily 16*, p. 56.

¹⁴⁶ *Homily 17*, p. 59.

¹⁴⁷ *Homily 56*, p. 222.

¹⁴⁸ *Homily 58*, p. 239.

true contemplation of God".¹⁴⁹ The beauty of temperance is achieved through fasting, prayer, and tears.¹⁵⁰ Purity of heart and intellect, the healing of the intellect and the other organs of understanding, all this is the fruit of long striving under grace, in asceticism. In the pure intellect of the ascetic of faith there bubbles up that fountain of light which pours sweetness upon the mystery of life and of the world.¹⁵¹

The Mystery of Knowledge

The healing and purification of the organs of human knowledge are brought about by the common action of God and man—by the grace of God and the will of man. On the long path of purification and healing, knowledge itself becomes purer and healthier. At every stage of its development, knowledge depends on the ontological structure and the ethical state of its organs. Purified and healed by a man's striving in the evangelical virtues, the organs of knowledge themselves acquire holiness and purity. A pure heart and pure mind engender pure knowledge. The organs of knowledge, when purified, healed, and turned towards God, give a pure and healthy knowledge of God and, when turned towards creation, give a pure and healthy knowledge of creation.

According to the teaching of St. Isaac the Syrian, there are two sorts of knowledge: that which precedes faith and that which is born of faith. The former is natural knowledge, and involves the discernment of good and evil. The latter is spiritual knowledge, and is "the perception of the mysteries", "the perception of what is hidden", "the contemplation of the invisible".¹⁵²

There are also two sorts of faith: the first comes through hearing and is confirmed and proven by the second, "the faith of contemplation", "the faith that is based on what has been seen".¹⁵³ In order to acquire spiritual knowledge, a man must first be freed from natural knowledge.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ *Homily* 16, p. 57.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Homily* 34, p. 150.

¹⁵² *Homily* 18, pp. 64–65.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Homily* 19, p. 69.

This is the work of faith. It is by the ascesis of faith that there comes to man that “unknown power”¹⁵⁵ that makes him capable of spiritual knowledge. If a man allows himself to be caught in the web of natural knowledge, it is more difficult for him to free himself from it than to cast off iron bonds, and his life is lived “against the edge of a sword”.¹⁵⁶

When a man begins to follow the path of faith, he must lay aside once and for all his old methods of knowing, for faith has its own methods. Then natural knowledge ceases and spiritual knowledge takes its place. Natural knowledge is contrary to faith, for faith, and all that comes from faith, is “the destruction of the laws of knowledge”—though not of spiritual, but of natural knowledge.¹⁵⁷

The chief characteristic of natural knowledge is its approach by examination and experimentation. This is in itself “a sign of uncertainty about the truth”. Faith, on the contrary, follows a pure and simple way of thought that is far removed from all guile and methodical examination. These two paths lead in opposite directions. The house of faith is “childlike thoughts and simplicity of heart”, for it is said: Glorify God “in simplicity of heart” (Col. 3:22), and: “Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). Natural knowledge stands opposed both to simplicity of heart and simplicity of thought. This knowledge only works within the limits of nature, “but faith has its own path beyond nature”.

The more a man devotes himself to the ways of natural knowledge, the more he is seized on by fear and the less he can free himself from it. But if he follows faith, he is immediately freed and “as a son of God, has the power to make free use of all things”. “The man who loves this faith acts like God in the use of all created things”, for to faith is given the power “to be like God in making a new creation”. Thus it is written: “Thou desiredst, and all things are presented before thee” (cf. Job 23:13 LXX). Faith can often “bring forth all things out of nothing”, while knowledge can do nothing “without the help of matter”. Knowledge has no power over nature, but faith has such power. Armed with faith, men have entered into the fire and quenched the flames, being untouched

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁵⁷ *Homily* 62, p. 250.

by them. Others have walked on the waters as on dry land. All these things are “beyond nature”; they go against the modes of natural knowledge and reveal the vanity of such modes. Faith “moves about above nature”. The ways of natural knowledge ruled the world for more than five thousand years, and man was unable to “lift his gaze from the earth and understand the might of his Creator” until “our faith arose and delivered us from the shadows of the works of this world” and from a fragmented mind. He who has faith “will lack nothing”, and, when he has nothing, “he possesses all things by faith”, as it is written: “All things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive” (Matt. 21:22); and also: “The Lord is near; be anxious for nothing” (Phil. 4:5–6).¹⁵⁸

Natural laws do not exist for faith. St. Isaac emphasizes this very strongly: “All things are possible to him that believeth” (Mark 9:23), for with God nothing is impossible.¹⁵⁹ Natural knowledge constrains its disciples from “drawing near to that which is alien to nature”, to that which is above nature.¹⁶⁰

This natural knowledge to which St. Isaac refers appears in modern philosophy under three headings: realism based on the senses, epistemological criticism, and monism. These three approaches all limit the power, reality, force, worth, criteria, and extent of knowledge to within the bounds of visible nature—to the extent that these coincide with the limits of the human senses as organs of knowledge. To step beyond the limits of nature and to enter into the realm of the supernatural is considered to be against nature, as something irrational and impossible, forbidden to the followers of the three philosophical paths in question. Directly or indirectly, man is limited to his senses and dare not pass beyond them.

Nevertheless, this natural knowledge, according to St. Isaac, is not at fault. It is not to be rejected. It is just that faith is higher than it is. This knowledge is only to be condemned in so far as, by the different means it uses, it turns against faith. But when this knowledge “is joined with faith, becoming one with her, clothing itself in her burning thoughts”, when it “acquires wings of passionlessness”, then, using other means than

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 250, 251–52.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 253.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

natural ones, it rises up from the earth “into the realm of its Creator”, into the supernatural. This knowledge is then fulfilled by faith and receives the power to “rise to the heights”, to perceive Him Who is beyond all perception and to “see the brightness that is incomprehensible to the mind and knowledge of created beings”. Knowledge is the level from which a man rises up to the heights of faith. When he reaches these heights, he has no more need of it, for it is written: “We know in part, but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away” (I Cor. 13:9–10). Faith reveals to us now the truth of perfection, as if it were before our eyes. It is by faith that we learn that which is beyond our grasp—by faith and not by enquiry and the power of knowledge.¹⁶¹

The works of righteousness are: fasting, almsgiving, vigils, purity of body, love of one’s neighbor, humbleness of heart, the forgiveness of sins, pondering on heavenly good things, study of the mysteries of Holy Scripture, the engagement of the mind in the higher works—these and all the other virtues are steps by which the soul rises to the highest realms of faith.¹⁶²

There are three spiritual modes in which knowledge rises and falls, and by which it moves and changes. These are the body, the soul and the spirit. Although knowledge is a single whole by its nature, it changes the way and form of its action in relation to each of these three. “Knowledge is a gift of God to the nature of rational beings, given to them at the beginning, at their creation. It is naturally simple and undivided, like the light from the sun, but in its function in relation to the body, the soul, and the spirit it changes and becomes divided”¹⁶³.

At its lowest level, knowledge “follows the desires of the flesh”, concerning itself with riches, vainglory, dress, repose of body and the search for rational wisdom. This knowledge invents the arts and sciences and all that adorns the body in this visible world. But in all this, such knowledge is contrary to faith. It is known as “mere knowledge, for it is deprived of all thought of the divine and, by its fleshly character, brings to the mind an irrational weakness, because in it the mind is overcome by

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁶² Ibid., pp. 254–55.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 255.

the body and its entire concern is for the things of this world". It is puffed up and filled with pride, for it refers every good work to itself and not to God. That which the Apostle said, "knowledge puffeth up" (I Cor. 8:1), was obviously said of this knowledge, which is not linked with faith and hope in God, and not of true knowledge. True, spiritual knowledge, linked with humility, brings to perfection the soul of those who have acquired it, as is seen in Moses, David, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, and all those who, within the limits of human nature, were counted worthy of this perfect knowledge. "With them, knowledge is always immersed in pondering things strange to this world, in divine revelations and lofty contemplation of spiritual things and ineffable mysteries. In their eyes, their own souls are but dust and ashes". Knowledge that comes of the flesh is criticized by Christians, who see it as opposed not only to faith but to every act of virtue.¹⁶⁴

It is not difficult to see that in this first and lowest degree of knowledge of which St. Isaac speaks is included virtually the whole of European philosophy, from naive realism to idealism—and all science from the atomism of Democrates to Einstein's relativity.

From the first and lowest degree of knowledge, man moves on to the second, when he begins both in body and soul to practice the virtues: fasting, prayer, almsgiving, the reading of Holy Scripture, the struggle with the passions, and so forth. Every good work, every goodly disposition of the soul in this second degree of knowledge, is begun and performed by the Holy Spirit through the working of this particular knowledge. The heart is shown the paths that lead to faith, even though this knowledge remains "bodily and composite".¹⁶⁵

The third degree of knowledge is that of perfection. "When knowledge rises up above the earth and the care for earthly things and begins to examine its own interior and hidden thoughts, scorning that from which the evil of the passions springs and rising up to follow the way of faith in concern for the life to come... and in the seeking out of hidden mysteries—then faith takes this knowledge into itself and absorbs it, returning and giving birth to it from the beginning, so as to become

¹⁶⁴ *Homily* 63, pp. 256–58.

¹⁶⁵ *Homily* 64, p. 258.

itself ‘from the beginning’, so as to become itself wholly spirit”. Then it can “take wing and fly to the realm of incorporeal spirits and plumb the depths of the fathomless ocean, pondering on the divine and wondrous things that govern the nature of spiritual and physical beings and penetrating the spiritual mysteries that can only be grasped by a simple and supple mind. Then the inner senses awaken to the work of the spirit in those things that belong to that other realm, immortal and incorruptible. This knowledge has, in a hidden way, here in this world, received already spiritual resurrection so as to bear true witness to the renewal of all things”.¹⁶⁶

These, according to St. Isaac, are the three degrees of knowledge with which the whole of man’s life is linked in body, soul and spirit. From the moment that he “begins to discern between good and evil to the moment of his leaving this world”, the soul’s knowledge is composed of one or all of these three degrees.¹⁶⁷

The first degree of knowledge “cools the soul’s ardor for endeavors on God’s path”. The second “re-kindles it for the swift path that leads to faith”. The third is a “rest from toil”, when the mind “feasts on the mysteries of the life to come”. “But, as nature cannot as yet wholly rise to the level of deathlessness and overcome the weight of the flesh and perfect itself in spiritual knowledge, not even this third degree of knowledge is able to move towards total perfection, so as to live in the world of death and yet leave behind completely fleshly nature”. While a man is in the flesh, therefore, he passes from one degree of knowledge to another. He has the help of grace, but is hindered by the demons, “for he is not totally free in this imperfect world”. Every work of knowledge consists in “effort and constant practice”, but the work of faith “does not consist in acts”, but in spiritual thoughts and in purity of soul, and this is above the senses. For faith is subtler than knowledge, as knowledge is subtler than the senses. All the saints who attained to such a life “abide by faith in the delights of a life above nature”. This faith is born in the soul through the light of grace which, “by the testimony of the mind, sustains the heart that it may not be uncertain in hope—in a hope that

¹⁶⁶ *Homily* 65, pp. 259–60.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

is far removed from all presumption". This faith has "spiritual eyes" which perceive "the mysteries hidden in the soul, hidden riches that are concealed from the eyes of sons of the flesh" but are revealed by the Holy Spirit, Who is received by the disciples of Christ (cf. John 14:15–17). The Holy Spirit is "the holy power" that abides within a man of Christ, preserving and defending his soul and body from evil. This invisible power is perceived with the eyes of faith by those whose minds are enlightened and sanctified. It is known to the saints "through experience".¹⁶⁸

To explain yet more clearly the mystery of knowledge, St. Isaac presents further definitions of both knowledge and faith. "The knowledge that is concerned with the visible and sensual is called natural; the knowledge that is concerned with the spiritual and incorporeal is called spiritual, for it receives its perception through the spirit, and not through the senses. The knowledge that comes by divine power, however, is known as supernatural. It is unknowable and is higher than knowledge". "The soul does not receive this contemplation from the matter that is outside it", as is the case with the first two kinds of knowledge, "but it comes unexpectedly by itself as an immaterial gift contained within itself, according to the words of Christ: 'The kingdom of God is within you' (Luke 17:21). There is no point awaiting its appearance in some outward form, for it does not come 'with observation' (Luke 17:20)".

The first knowledge comes "from continual study and the desire to learn. The second comes from a proper way of life and a clearly held faith. The third comes from faith alone, for in it knowledge is done away, activity ceases, and the senses become superfluous".¹⁶⁹ For the mysteries of the Spirit, "which are beyond knowledge and are not apprehended either by the bodily senses nor the rational powers of the mind, God has given us a faith by which we know only that these mysteries exist". The Savior calls the coming of the Comforter "the gifts of the revelation of the mysteries of the Spirit" (cf. John 14:16, 26), and it is therefore seen that the perfection of spiritual knowledge consists "in the receiving of the Spirit, as did the apostles". "Faith is the gateway to the mysteries. As bodily eyes see material things, so faith looks with spiritual eyes on that

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 260–62.

¹⁶⁹ *Homily* 66, pp. 262–63.

which is hidden". When a man passes through the gate of faith, God leads him into "the spiritual mysteries and opens the sea of faith to his understanding".¹⁷⁰

All the virtues have a role to play in this spiritual knowledge, for it is the fruit of the practice of the virtues.¹⁷¹ Faith "engenders the fear of God", and from this fear of God follow repentance and the practice of the virtues, which itself gives birth to spiritual knowledge.¹⁷² This knowledge, "coming from long experience and practice of the virtues, is pleasant" and gives a man great power.¹⁷³ The first and chief basis of spiritual knowledge is a healthy soul, a healthy organ of knowledge. "Knowledge is the fruit of a healthy soul", while a healthy soul is the result of long practice of the evangelical virtues.¹⁷⁴ The "healthy of soul" are the perfect, and it is to them that knowledge is given.¹⁷⁵

It is very difficult, and often impossible, to express in words the mystery and nature of knowledge. In the realm of human thought, there is no ready definition that can explain it completely. St. Isaac therefore gives many different definitions of knowledge. He is continually exercised in this matter, and the problem stands like a burning question mark before the eyes of this holy ascetic. The saint presents answers from his rich and blessed experience, achieved through long and hard ascesis. But the most profound, and to my mind the most exhaustive answer that man can give to this question is that given by St. Isaac in the form of a dialogue:

"Question: What is knowledge?

"Answer: The perception of eternal life.

"Question: And what is eternal life?

"Answer: To perceive all things in God. For love comes through understanding, and the knowledge of God is ruler over all desires. To the heart that receives this knowledge every delight that exists on earth is superfluous, for there is nothing that can compare with the delight of the knowledge of God".¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ *Homily* 72, p. 281.

¹⁷¹ *Homily* 44, p. 183.

¹⁷² *Homily* 18, p. 65.

¹⁷³ *Homily* 48, p. 198.

¹⁷⁴ *Homily* 38, p. 164.

¹⁷⁵ *Homily* 44, p. 185.

¹⁷⁶ *Homily* 38, p. 164.

Knowledge is therefore victory over death, the linking of this life with immortal life and the uniting of man with God. The very act of knowledge touches on the immortal, for it is by knowledge that man passes beyond the limits of the subjective and enters the realm of the trans-subjective. And when the trans-subjective object is God, then the mystery of knowledge becomes the mystery of mysteries and the enigma of enigmas. Such knowledge is a mystical fabric woven on the loom of the soul by the man who is united with God.

For human knowledge the most vital problem is that of truth. Knowledge bears within itself an irresistible pull towards the infinite mystery, and this hunger for truth that is instinctive to human knowledge is never satisfied until eternal and absolute Truth itself becomes the substance of human knowledge—until knowledge, in its own self-perception, acquires the perception of God, and in its own self-knowledge comes to the knowledge of God. But this is given to man only by Christ, the God-man, He Who is the only incarnation and personification of eternal truth in the world of human realities. When a man has received the God-man into himself as the soul of his soul and the life of his life, than that man is constantly filled with the knowledge of eternal truth.

What is truth? St. Isaac answers thus: “Truth is the perception of things that is given by God”.¹⁷⁷ In other words: the perception of God is truth. If this perception exists in a man, he both has and knows the truth. If he does not have this perception, then truth does not exist for him. Such a man may always be seeking truth, but he will never find it until he comes to the perception of God, in which lie both the perception and knowledge of truth.

It is the man who restores and transforms his organs of knowledge by the practice of the virtues that comes to the perception and knowledge of the truth. For him faith and knowledge, and all that goes with them, are one indivisible and organic whole. They fulfill and are fulfilled by one another, and each confirms and supports the other. “The light of the mind gives birth to faith”, says St. Isaac, “and faith gives birth to the consolation of hope, while hope fortifies the heart. Faith is the enlightenment of the understanding. When the understanding is darkened, then faith hides itself and fear holds sway, cutting off hope. Faith, which

¹⁷⁷ *Homily* 69, p. 272.

bathes the understanding in light, frees man from pride and doubt, and is known as ‘the knowledge and manifestation of the truth.’”¹⁷⁸

Holy knowledge comes from a holy life, but pride darkens that holy knowledge.¹⁷⁹ The light of truth increases and decreases according to a man’s way of life.¹⁸⁰ Terrible temptations fall upon those who seek to live a spiritual life. The ascetic of faith must therefore pass through great sufferings and misfortunes in order to come to knowledge of the truth.¹⁸¹

A troubled mind and chaotic thoughts are the fruit of a disordered life, and these darken the soul.¹⁸² When the passions are driven from the soul with the help of the virtues, when “the curtain of the passions is drawn back from the eyes of the mind”, then the intellect can perceive the glory of the other world.¹⁸³ The soul grows by means of the virtues, the mind is confirmed in the truth and becomes unshakable, “girded for encountering and slaying every passion”.¹⁸⁴ Freedom from the passions is brought about by the crucifying of both the intellect and the flesh. This makes a man capable of contemplating God. The intellect is crucified when unclean thoughts are driven out of it, and the body when the passions are uprooted.¹⁸⁵ “A body given over to pleasure cannot be the abode of the knowledge of God”.¹⁸⁶

True knowledge—“the revelation of the mysteries”—is attained by means of the virtues,¹⁸⁷ and this is “the knowledge that saves”.¹⁸⁸ The chief characteristic—and “proof”—of this knowledge is humility.¹⁸⁹ When the intellect “abides in the realm of knowledge of the truth”, then all questioning ceases,¹⁹⁰ and a great calm and peace descend upon it. This

¹⁷⁸ *Homily* 58, p. 240.

¹⁷⁹ *Homily* 61, p. 249.

¹⁸⁰ *Homily* 84, p. 323.

¹⁸¹ *Homily* 57, p. 233.

¹⁸² *Homily* 78, p. 299.

¹⁸³ *Homily* 19, p. 62; *Letter* 4, p. 382.

¹⁸⁴ *Homily* 83, p. 318; cf. *Homily* 85, p. 335.

¹⁸⁵ *Homily* 30, p. 130.

¹⁸⁶ *Homily* 56, p. 226.

¹⁸⁷ *Homily* 37, p. 161.

¹⁸⁸ *Homily* 5, p. 19.

¹⁸⁹ *Homily* 5, p. 31

¹⁹⁰ *Letter* 4, p. 383.

peace of mind is called “perfect health”.¹⁹¹ When the power of the Holy Spirit enters into the soul, then the soul “learns through the Spirit”.¹⁹²

In the philosophy of St. Isaac, the problem of the nature of knowledge becomes an ontological and ethical problem which, in the last resort, is seen to be the problem of human personality. The nature and character of knowledge depend ontologically, morally, and gnoseologically on the constitution of the human person, and especially on the constitution and state of its organs of knowledge. In the person of the ascetic of faith, knowledge, of its very nature, turns into contemplation.

Contemplation

In the philosophy of the holy fathers, contemplation has an ontological, ethical and gnoseological significance. It means prayerful concentration of the soul, through the action of grace, on the mysteries that surpass our understanding and are abundantly present not only in the Holy Trinity but in the person of man himself and in the whole of God’s creation. In contemplation, the person of the ascetic of faith lives above the senses, above the categories of time and space. He has a vivid awareness of the links that bind him to the higher world and is nourished by revelations that contain those things which “eye has not seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man” (I Cor. 2:9).

St. Isaac strives to put into words his great experience, gained through the grace that brought him to contemplation. As far as human language permits the grasping and translation of the truths of religious experience, he seeks to explain as clearly as possible what contemplation is. According to him, contemplation is the sense of divine mysteries hidden within things and events.¹⁹³ Contemplation is found in the finest workings of the mind and in continual pondering on God. Its abode is unceasing prayer,¹⁹⁴ and thus it illuminates the spiritual part of the soul, the intellect.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ *Homily* 58, p. 234.

¹⁹² *Homily* 56, p. 227.

¹⁹³ *Homily* 30, p. 131.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

“Sometimes contemplation springs from prayer, silencing the prayer of the lips. Then the man at prayer becomes through contemplation a body without breath, outside himself. This state is known as the contemplation of prayer”. “In this prayerful contemplation there exist various degrees and a diversity of gifts”, for “the mind has not yet passed” into that realm where there is no longer prayer (where “prayer does not exist”), for in that realm there is something greater than prayer.¹⁹⁶

By the help of a good life lived in grace, the ascetic of faith ascends to contemplation. “To begin with he becomes confident in God’s providence towards men and is illumined by love towards his Creator and marvels at His care for the rational beings that He has made. After this there arises in him the sweetness of God and a burning love for God in his heart, a love that burns away the passions of both soul and body”. He is then “drunk with the wine of divine love... and his thoughts are drawn beyond themselves and his heart led captive after God”. “It seems to him at times that he is not in the body or even in this world. Such is the beginning of spiritual contemplation in a man—of contemplation and at the same time of all revelation to the mind”. The mind “grows” with the help of contemplation and rises up to revelations “that are beyond human nature”. In brief: in contemplation “there are brought to man all the divine contemplations and spiritual revelations that the saints receive in this world, and all the gifts and revelations that nature itself is capable of knowing in this world”.¹⁹⁷

The virtue of understanding “humbles the soul and purifies it from clouded thoughts, that it may not loiter among the passions but press forward to contemplation”. This contemplation brings the mind close to its primal nature and is called “immaterial contemplation”. It is a “spiritual virtue”, for “it lifts the soul up above the earth, bringing it close to the primal contemplation of the Spirit, introducing the mind to God and to the contemplation of His ineffable glory... holding the mind apart from this world and the perception of it”.¹⁹⁸ The life of the Spirit is an activity in which the senses have no part. The holy fathers wrote about this: “As soon as the intellects of the saints have made this life

¹⁹⁶ *Homily* 31, p. 134.

¹⁹⁷ *Homily* 40, pp. 169 and 170.

¹⁹⁸ *Homily* 17, p. 59.

their own, material contemplation and the opacity of the flesh fall back, and spiritual contemplation takes their place".¹⁹⁹

"The modalities of prayer" are manifold, says St. Isaac, but they all have one aim: pure prayer. In the depths of this pure prayer there lies "a rapture that is not prayer, for everything that can be called prayer ceases, and there remains a contemplation in which the mind cannot utter prayers". "Prayer is one thing, but this contemplation-in-prayer is another, although one flows from the other. Prayer is the sowing, and contemplation the gathering-in of the sheaves, in which the harvester stands amazed at the wondrous abundance of the full ears that have grown from the poor little grains he has sown". In this state of contemplation, the intellect passes beyond its own limits and enters "that other world".²⁰⁰

Transformed by prayer and other ascetic practices, the mind becomes purified and learns "to contemplate God with divine and not human eyes".²⁰¹

He who guards his heart from the passions contemplates God at every instant. He who maintains a constant vigilance over his soul "at every hour contemplates the Lord". "He who watches over his own soul at every hour will see his heart rejoice in revelations. He who draws the contemplation of his intellect within himself will contemplate the dawn of the Spirit. He who recoils from the diffusion of his mind will contemplate the Lord in the inner recesses of his heart... Behold, heaven is within you, if you are pure, and you will see the angels in their radiance and, with them and within them, their Lord Himself... The soul of a righteous man shines more brightly than the sun, and rejoices at every hour in the contemplation of things revealed".²⁰²

When, after the strict ascesis of the Gospel, a man finds within himself the divine center of his being—and finds there also the center of the transcendent divinity in this visible world—then he rises above time and beholds himself as from eternity. He sees himself as above time and space, deathless and eternal. At its root, true self-knowledge is also true knowledge of God, for man carries the shortest path between himself

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁰⁰ *Homily* 32, p. 135.

²⁰¹ *Homily* 35, p. 154.

²⁰² *Homily* 43, p. 176.

and God in the Godlike nature of his own soul. Here lies the shortest distance between man and God. All of man's paths towards God may well meet a dead-end; only this one leads surely to God in Christ. In his philosophy, St. Isaac lays great emphasis on self-knowledge. "He who has been counted worthy to see himself", he says, "is greater than he who has been counted worthy to see angels".²⁰³

To acquire the capacity to see into his own soul, a man must first open his heart to grace.²⁰⁴ "To the extent that souls are impure or darkened they can see neither themselves nor others". Insight will come "if a man purifies his soul and brings it back to its primal state".²⁰⁵ "He who desires to see God within himself must strive by constant recollection of God to purify his heart; and thus, with the light from the eyes of his mind, he will see God at every hour. As it is with a fish out of water, so it is with an intellect that has turned aside from the recollection of God... For the man with a pure mind, the realm of the Spirit is within himself; the sun that shines within him is the light of the Holy Trinity and the air breathed by the inhabitants of this realm is the Holy Spirit, the Comforter... Their life, their joy and their gladness is Christ, the radiance of the Father's light. Such a man is always gladdened at the contemplation of his soul, marveling at its beauty that is indeed brighter than a thousand suns. This is Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God, hidden, as the Lord says, within us (Luke 17:21). This realm is the cloud of God's glory into which only the pure of heart may enter to behold the face of their Master and to fill their intellects with the radiance of His light... A man cannot see the beauty that is within himself until he has discounted and despised all the beauty that is outside him... A man who is healthy of soul, who is humble and meek—such a man, as soon as he turns to prayer, sees the light of the Holy Spirit within his soul and rejoices at beholding the rays of His light, delighting in the contemplation of its glory".²⁰⁶

A man can understand the nature of his soul by the light of the Holy Spirit. "By nature the soul is free of the passions. When, in Holy Scripture, passions of the soul and of the flesh are spoken of, this refers

²⁰³ *Homily* 34, p. 153.

²⁰⁴ *Homily* 73, p. 291.

²⁰⁵ *Homily* 67, p. 265.

²⁰⁶ *Homily* 43, pp. 177–78.

to their causes, for the soul is by nature passionless. This is not accepted by the adherents of profane philosophy”—or, as we would say today, the adherents of materialist, realist, and phenomenalist philosophy. On the contrary, God created the soul in His image, and therefore passionless.²⁰⁷

There exist three states of soul: natural, unnatural, and supernatural. “The natural state of the soul is the knowledge of God’s creation, both visible and spiritual. The supernatural state of the soul is the contemplation of the super-essential Divinity. The unnatural state of the soul is its involvement in the passions”, for the passions do not belong to its nature.²⁰⁸ Passion is an unnatural state of the soul, but virtue is its natural state.²⁰⁹ When the mind is fed by the virtues, especially that of compassion, the soul is then “adorned with that holy beauty” through which man is indeed in the likeness of God.²¹⁰ The “holy beauty” of man’s being is revealed in a pure heart, and the more a man develops this holy beauty within himself, the more he will see the beauty of God’s creation.²¹¹

This shows that self-knowledge is the best way to come to a true knowledge of nature and the material world in general. “He who submits himself to God”, says St. Isaac, “is close to being able to submit all things to himself. To him who knows himself is given to know all things, for knowledge of self is the fullness of the knowledge of all things”.²¹² If a man humbles himself before God, all creation humbles itself before him. “True humility is born of knowledge, and true knowledge is the fruit of temptation”²¹³—that is, it comes through the battle with temptations.

Human nature is capable of true contemplation when it is cleansed from the passions by the exercise of the virtues. The true contemplation of the material and immaterial world, and of the Holy Trinity Itself, is the gift of Christ. He revealed this contemplation to men and instructed them in it “when He, in His own Divine Person, completed the renewal of human nature and, through His life-giving commandments,

²⁰⁷ *Homily* 82, p. 314.

²⁰⁸ *Homily* 83, p. 316.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

²¹⁰ *Homily* 1, p. 6.

²¹¹ *Letter* 3, p. 366.

²¹² *Homily* 16, p. 58.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 59; cf. *Homily* 44, p. 186.

cleared a path to the truth. Human nature only becomes capable of true contemplation when a man first puts off the old Adam through enduring the passions, through fulfilling the commandments and by suffering misfortune... In these circumstances the intellect becomes capable of spiritual birth and of the contemplation of the spiritual world, its true fatherland... The contemplation of the new world revealed by the Spirit, in which the intellect takes spiritual delight, occurs under the action of grace... This contemplation becomes a food that nourishes the intellect, preparing it to receive a contemplation that is yet more perfect. For one contemplation leads into another, until the intellect is brought into the realm of perfect love. Love itself is the abode, the ‘place’ of spiritual man; it dwells in purity of soul. When the intellect reaches the realm of love, grace works in it and the intellect receives spiritual contemplation and becomes a beholder of hidden things”.²¹⁴

Mystical contemplation “is revealed to the intellect when the soul has been made whole”.²¹⁵ Those who have cleansed their souls by the practice of the virtues become worthy of spiritual contemplation.²¹⁶ “Purity sees God”.²¹⁷ Those who have cleansed themselves from sin and unceasingly ponder on God behold Him.²¹⁸ “The kingdom of heaven is called spiritual contemplation, for this is what it is”, says St. Isaac. “It is not found through the activity of thought, but can be tasted by grace. Until a man cleanses himself he is in no state even to hear of the Kingdom, for no one can acquire it through teaching”, only through purity of heart.²¹⁹ God gives pure thoughts to those who live pure lives.²²⁰ “Purity of thought springs from striving and from guarding the heart, and from purity of thought comes the enlightenment of the understanding. From there grace leads the intellect to the realm where the senses have no power, where they neither instruct nor are instructed”.²²¹

²¹⁴ *Letter 4*, p. 389.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

²¹⁸ Cf. *Homily 5*, p. 26 and *Homily 43*, p. 177.

²¹⁹ *Homily 19*, p. 70; cf. *Homily 35*, p. 154.

²²⁰ *Homily 25*, p. 105.

²²¹ *Homily 30*, p. 131.

By vigilance in prayer “the mind takes wing and flies upwards”, “towards the delights of God”. “It swims in a knowledge that surpasses human thought”. “The soul that strives to persevere in this vigilance receives the eyes of the cherubim with which to dwell in constant, heavenly contemplation”.²²² The soul of man sees the truth of God through the power of his way of life, that is, through the life of faith. “If his contemplation is true, he will find the light and what he contemplates will be in the realm of truth”.²²³ “The vision of God comes from the knowledge of God, and cannot precede this knowledge”.²²⁴

The goal of a Christian is life in and contemplation of the Holy Trinity. According to St. Isaac, love is “the primal contemplation of the Holy Trinity”. “The first of the mysteries is called purity, and is attained through the performance of the commandments. But contemplation is the spiritual contemplation of the intellect”. It comes from “the mind’s entering into rapture and understanding both that which was and that which will be. Contemplation is the vision of the intellect. In it the heart is chastened, renewed, and cleansed of evil, becoming familiar with the mysteries of the Spirit and the revelations of knowledge, rising from knowledge to knowledge, from contemplation to contemplation, and from understanding to understanding, learning and growing secretly until it is caught up into love, incorporated into hope, until joy takes up residence in its inmost parts, until it is lifted up to God and crowned with the natural glory of its own created being”. Thus the mind “is purified and endowed with mercy, actually being counted worthy to contemplate the Holy Trinity”.²²⁵ For there are three sorts of natural contemplation in which the mind “is uplifted, active and engaged”: “two are of the created world—of the rational and the non-rational, the spiritual and the bodily; and the third is the contemplation of the Holy Trinity”.²²⁶

If the ascetic of faith, enriched by the unspeakable riches of contemplation, turns towards creation, his whole being is filled with love and compassion. “He loves the sinner”, says St. Isaac, “while loathing his

²²² *Homily* 29, p. 125; cf. *ibid.*, p. 124, and *Letter* 4, p. 364.

²²³ *Letter* 4, p. 388.

²²⁴ *Homily* 16, p. 58.

²²⁵ *Letter* 4, p. 387.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

works”²²⁷ He is woven through with humility and mercy, with repentance and love. He has a heart filled with love for every creature. “What is a merciful heart?” “It is”, St. Isaac replies, “a heart burning with love towards the whole of creation: towards men, birds, animals, demons, and every creature. His eyes overflow with tears at the thought and sight of them. From the great and powerful sorrow that constrains his heart and from his great patience, his heart contracts, and he cannot bear to hear or see the least harm done to or misfortune suffered by creation. Therefore he also prays with tears incessantly for irrational beasts, for opponents of the truth, and for those who do him harm, that they may be preserved and receive mercy. He also prays for the reptiles with great sorrow, a sorrow that is without measure in his heart and which likens him to God”²²⁸

When, by an evangelical asceticism, someone moves from the temporal to the eternal, when he lives in God and thinks in Him, when he speaks “as of God” (II Cor. 2:17), when he looks on the world *sub specie Christi*, then the world is shown to him in its primordial beauty. With the gaze of a purified heart, he penetrates the crust of sin and sees the divinely made core of creation. The contemplation of the Holy Trinity, essentially mysterious and unknowable, is manifested by the ascetic of faith in this world of transient and limited realities through love and mercy, through meekness and humility, through prayer and toil for each and all, through rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep, through suffering with those who suffer and repenting with the penitent. His life in this world reflects his life in that other world of mysterious and invisible values. His thoughts and acts in this world have their roots in the other world, and it is from the other world that they draw their life-giving and wonder-working strength and power. If one were to trace any one of his thoughts, feelings, acts, or ascetic practices, one would be brought to the Holy Trinity as the primary source of them all. All things come to him from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. We have the most beautiful example of this in St. Isaac himself, that great ascetic of the Holy Trinity who, with St.

²²⁷ *Homily* 5, p. 30.

²²⁸ *Homily* 81, p. 306.

Symeon the New Theologian, was able, with the help of grace and ascetic experience, to give us the most convincing justification of the truth of the Triune Godhead and of the Godlike trinity of man's personal being.

Conclusion

St. Isaac's theory of knowledge is dominated by the conviction that the problem of knowledge is fundamentally a religious and ethical problem. From its inception to its infinite fulfillment in grace, knowledge depends on the religious and ethical content and quality of the person, and above all on the religious and ethical culture and development of man's organs of knowledge. One thing is certain: that knowledge, on all levels, depends on man's religious and moral state. The more perfect a man is from the religious and moral standpoint, the more perfect is his knowledge. Man has been made in such a way that knowledge and morality are always balanced within him.

There is no doubt that knowledge progresses through man's virtues and regresses through the passions. Knowledge is like a fabric woven by the virtues on the loom of the human soul. The loom of the soul extends through all the visible and invisible worlds. The virtues are not only powers creating knowledge; they are the principles and source of knowledge. By transforming the virtues into constituent elements of his being through ascetic endeavor, a man advances from knowledge to knowledge. It could even be possible to say that the virtues are the sense organs of knowledge. Advancing from one virtue to another, a man moves from one form of comprehension to another.

From the first virtue, faith, to the last, which is love for all, there extends one unbroken path: asceticism. On this long path a man forms, transforms, and transfigures himself through the grace of his ascetic endeavors. In this way he heals his being from the sicknesses of sin and ignorance, restoring the integrity of his person, unifying and making whole his spirit.

Healed and made whole by the religious and moral power of the virtues, a man gives expression to the purity and integrity of his person particularly through the purity and integrity of his knowledge. According to the evangelical, Orthodox understanding found in St. Isaac the

Syrian, knowledge is an action, an ascesis, of the whole human person, and not of one part of his being—whether it be the intellect, the understanding, the will, the body, or the senses. In every act of knowledge, in every thought, feeling, and desire, the whole man is involved with his entire being.

Healed by the grace of ascetic endeavor, the organs of knowledge bring forth pure and healthy knowledge, the “sound (literally *healthy*) doctrine” of the Apostle (I Tim. 1:10; II Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1). At all stages of its development this knowledge is “full of grace”, for it is a product of the working together of man’s voluntary ascesis and God’s grace-filled power. The whole of man shares in it with the whole of God. For this reason St. Isaac speaks continually of the recollection, the “gathering in” of the soul, the mind, and the thoughts, a recollection that is achieved by the practice of the evangelical virtues.

But these virtues differ from those of other religious and philosophical ethics, not only in their content but also in their method. The evangelical virtues have a specific content linking God and man, and their own specific method of working. In His incomparably perfect Divine-human, or “theanthropic”, person the God-man Jesus Christ both showed and proved that this method, this Divine-human way of life, is the only natural and normal way of life and of knowledge. The man who makes this way of faith his own finds in it also a way of knowledge. That which is valid for faith is valid also for the other godly virtues: love, hope, prayer, fasting, meekness, humility, and so forth; for each of these virtues becomes, in the man who lives in Christ, a living, creative force of life and knowledge.

In this theanthropic way of life and knowledge, there is nothing that is unreal, abstract, or hypothetical. Here all is real with an irresistible reality, for all is based on experience. In the person of Christ the God-man, transcendent, divine reality is shown forth and defined in an utterly empirical way. By His Incarnation Christ has given to human flesh the most subtle, the most transcendent, the most perfect reality. This reality has no bounds, for the person of Christ is limitless. It follows that human personality has no bounds, nor has men’s knowledge, for it is said and commanded: “Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). This means that the only bounds of human personality and knowledge are the limitless bounds of God.

The person of Christ the God-man presents in itself the perfect, ideal reality of theanthropic monism: a natural passage from God to man, from the supernatural to the natural, from immortal life to human life. Such a passage is also natural for knowledge when, by the bridge of faith, hope, and love, it passes from man to God, from the natural to the supernatural, from the mortal to the immortal, and from the temporal to the eternal, thus revealing the organic unity of this life and the life to come, of this world and the other, of the natural and the supernatural.

This knowledge is an integral knowledge, for it rises on the wings of the divine and human virtues and passes without hindrance through the barriers of time and space, entering into the eternal. It is of this integral knowledge that St. Isaac is thinking when, in defining knowledge, he says that it is “the perception of eternal life”, and when, defining truth, he calls it “the perception of God”.

That which is true for the virtues is true also for knowledge. As each virtue begets other virtues, and begets knowledge, so each sort of knowledge begets another. One virtue produces another and sustains it, and the same is true of knowledge.

The more a man exercises himself in the virtues, the greater becomes his knowledge of God. The more he knows God, the greater is his asceticism. This is an empirical and pragmatic path. “If any man will do His (God’s) will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God” (John 7:17). In other words: it is by living the truth of Christ that one comes to know its veracity and uniqueness. This is truly an empirical, experimental, and pragmatic path. The knowledge of the truth is not given to the curious, but to those who follow the ascetic way. Knowledge is a fruit on the tree of the virtues, which is the tree of life. Knowledge comes from asceticism. For the true Christian, Orthodox philosophy is in fact the theanthropic ascesis of the intellect and of the whole person. Here, those arresting words of the Savior are especially significant: “Him who hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have” (Luke 8:18).

Looked at in the light of St. Isaac’s theory of knowledge, naive realism is both tragically and lethally simplistic. It can give no real knowledge of the world, for it makes use of sick and corrupt organs of knowledge. By contrast, theanthropic realism gives a real knowledge of the

world and of the truth that lies therein, for it uses organs of knowledge that have been purified, healed, and renewed and can see into the very heart of all that is created.

Rationalism considers the understanding to be an infallible organ of knowledge. Therefore, in relationship with the whole human person, it appears as an anarchic apostate. It is like a branch that has cut itself off from the vine, which can have no full life or creative reality on its own. It is in no state to come to a knowledge of the truth, for in its ego-centric isolation it is divided, scattered, and full of gaps. Truth, by contrast, is given to an intellect that has been purified, enlightened, transfigured and deified by the action of the virtues.

Philosophical criticism is almost exclusively occupied with the study of the organs of knowledge in their psychic and physical state as given in the merely human realm. To this it adds the study of the categories and conditions which are the premises of knowledge. But it pays no attention to the need for the healing and purification of the organs of knowledge. Therefore philosophical criticism cannot by itself come to a knowledge of the truth, for it is nothing more than a cautious rationalism and sensualism.

Philosophical idealism is based on transcendental realities and criteria, but is in no state to prove their existence. Founded on transcendental ideas, it is nevertheless unable to attain to the knowledge of the truth so necessary to human nature or to quench, even in part, the thirst for eternal truth and enduring realities.

All that these various *epistemological* systems are unable to give to man is given by Orthodox philosophy with its grace-filled, ascetic theory of knowledge. Here, eternal Truth Himself stands before human knowledge in the fullness of His infinite perfection, giving Himself to enlightened and grace-endowed man. For it is in the person of Christ the God-man that transcendental, divine truth comes to man. In Him truth becomes objectively immanent and presents an immediate and eternally vital historical reality. In order to make this his own, to make it a subjective immanence, it is essential that man, by the practice of the virtues, make the Lord Jesus Christ the soul of his soul, the heart of his heart, and the life of his life.